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ABSTRACT

Thirty male and twenty female students were used to investigate the strategies of topic management. In pairs, they were told that the male (or female) would like to become friends with the female (or male), and were assigned a dialogue which created a positive or a negative context. Then the subject assigned as the initiator was given one of three continuing strategies: direct topic change, indirect topic change, or direct topic continuation. The subjects were asked to judge the effectiveness of the strategy, with the hypotheses being that a female communicator who uses an indirect topic management strategy instead of a direct one would be judged as more competent and effective and the converse would be true for the male; when the female employs indirection she will be perceived as more predictable than when she is direct and the converse would be true for the male. None of these hyptcheses were supported by the data, which showed that the situational distinction had more influence on judgments of strategies than the sex of the initiator, and that when the strategy and intention corresponded, subjects rendered a judgment of high effectiveness regardless of the nature of the situation or the sex of the initiator. (TJ)

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Sex Role and Topic Management Strategies in Interpersonal Communication

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Introduction

Several trends are apparent in contemporary communication research, including: micro-analysis of messages and message exchanges,[1] exploration of communicative competence,[2] scrutiny of communication in developing relationships,[3] and examination of communicative differences between males and females.[4] To some extent, each of these areas of research reflects a generalized reaction to (and movement away from) the dominant paradigm of the 60's which de-emphasized the details of communicative exchanges and the role of situational factors, focusing instead primarily on non-messages variables, e.g., source credibility and attitude change. We share this "new perspective" in communication research; in fact, our study, which we will soon describe, incorporates each of the four trends we just mentioned.

Initial Interactions, Communication, and Social Penetration

Competent communicators in our culture (and in many others, almost certainly) know that there are some things that can be revealed to strangers and others things which cannot be. This knowledge comprises, among other things, rules for appropriate communication in initial interactions. These rules are of the "though shalt/though shalt not" form, e.g., though shalt not disclose highly intimate information during the earliest phase of a relationship. Communication during initial interactions is designed to reduce mutual uncertainty gradually,[5] an outcome which may be rewarding to both interactants;[6] i.e., uncertainty reduction is often pleasurable. Of course, in some cases decreased uncertainty is

costly or punishing; for example, as Jill gets to know Jim, she may become certain that his values are seriously opposed to hers.

The content of communication during initial interactions has been the focus of recent empirical investigation. Among the most specific of these inquiries was a study by Berger, et al.[7] in which subjects were asked to imagine that they were observing a conversation between two persons who were meeting for the first time. From this perspective, subjects were asked to sort statements (representing topics of communication) according to which segment of a two-hour conversation they would be most likely to appear in. The hypothetical conversation was partitioned into eight segments. One hundred and fifty statements were sorted. An additional category was reserved for statements which subjects thought would not occur. As in other studies of social penetration, the results of the Berger, et al. study showed that biographic-demographic items and inconsequential opinion items were sorted into the earliest time categories, whereas more intimate items ("I think sex is dirty") were placed in the later categories or were judged not likely to occur at all.

The research on communication and social penetration has examined antecedents for and consequences of topical intimacy almost exclusively. Other dimensions of communication in initial interactions should be examined as well. For example, a recent study suggests that responses to high- and low-intimacy messages are influenced by the linguistic style in which such messages are encoded; i.e., the same level of intimacy produced different judgments of a communicator depending upon the type of language he used.[8] We are interested in the communicative consequences of different strategies in the initial phases of social penetration when they are employed by male and female communicators.

Sex Role and Topic Management Strategies

The study of strategic communication in male/female interactions has been a neglected subject despite the burgeoning interest in effects of sex roles in interpersonal interactions. Popular literature from Helen Gurley Brown's Sex and the Single Girl[9] to George Bach and Peter Wyden's The Intimate Enemy[10] attest to the importance of strategies in male/female relations. Toni Falbo makes a more specific observation when she writes, "Television programs, comic strips, and other purveyors of cultural wisdom constantly remind us that men and women 'get their way' with remarkably different methods. Men are supposed to use physical force and give commands; women are supposed to appear appealingly helpless and drop hints. Likewise, popular stereotypes portray men and women differently in terms of their susceptibility to influence. Men are expected to be independent and individualistic; women are expected to be gullible and yielding."[11] Falbo's research demonstrated that "feminine people" regardless of sex were more likely than masculine or androgynous people to report using tears, emotional alteration and subtlety or indirectness in their attempts to influence others. Related studies were done by Paula Johnson and Jacqueline Goodchilds at UCLA. In one study these researchers asked two hundred and fifty college students to write a paragraph on the subject "how I get my way." They state, "The essays ranged from the use of blunt and simple argument to Machiavellian plots."[12] An example of a female's report is as follows:

> I pout, I frown and say something to make the other person feel bad such as 'you don't love me,' 'you don't care what happens to me.' I'm not the type to come right out with what I want. I will usually beat around the bush.[13]

In order to examine male/female communication in more detail, we undertook a specific examination of the relationship between sex role and topic management

strategies. Topic management strategies were deemed important for investigation for several reasons. First, although a great deal of work has been done on the use of strategies, very little of this work has focused on specific communication variables. We hoped that the focus on topic management strategies would enable us to gain insight into the means by which messages are used to achieve certain goals in initial encounters.

Another reason for investigating topic-management was empirical. In a preliminary study which was done by the first author of this paper, approximately fifty subjects were presented with a number of different descriptions of hypothetical communication encounters. The encounters included the beginning of a conversation between two people and subjects were asked to generate some messages which "might come next" in the conversation. When subjects' responses were examined, it became apparent that the primary variable on which different messages could be classified was topic management.[14]

Writers like Speier,[15] Ervin-Tripp[16] and Allen and Guy[17] have discussed the importance of topic and topic management in conversations, but they have done little to investigate this phenomenon in specific terms. In Wiemann's investigation of his "model of communicative competence" he found a strong positive correlation between effective interaction management and what he called 'communicative competence.' Wiemann manipulated two types of interaction management behaviors: (1) "conventional turn-taking synchronization" and (2) topic control.[18] Wiemann defined highly competent interaction management as "smooth synchronization of speaking turns as evidenced by no attempts at simultaneous turns, no pauses in conversation of three seconds or longer (based on data by Goldman-Eisler, 1968) and bilateral topic control."[19] He added that "Interruptions, pauses of three seconds or more, and unilateral topic changes

were defined as interaction management errors."[20] On the negative side, Steffen and Redden found no difference in the number of topics or topic changes between those whom they defined as "high competent" men and "low competent" men.[21]

Hypotheses and Research Questions

On the basis of the materials just discussed, we expected that a female communicator who initiates an interaction with the purpose of advancing a heterosexual relationship will be judged as more competent and effective if she uses an indirect topic management strategy instead of a direct approach; conversely, a male initiator will be seen as more competent and effective if he uses the direct strategy (H_1). When the female employs indirection she will be perceived as a more predictable person than when she is direct; conversely, the male will be judged more predictable when he is direct (H_2).

The relationship between message strategy and sex of initiator may influence judgments of the initiator's personality--specifically, the degree to which he or she is deemed high or low in "internality". Persons who are judged to be "high internals" are perceived as having a great deal of control over other persons, events, etc. On the other hand, "low internals" are perceived as having little such control.[22] There is some evidence that when a person violates expectations, e.g., when he or she fails to perform a behavior required by a social role, we will perceive the violation as being internally caused, i.e., produced by a personal disposition as opposed to a situation-specific constraint.[23] By extension, this sort of violation may lead a witness to attribute to the violator a general predisposition toward internal control, i.e., high internality. This suggests that a female initiator who uses the direct topic management strategy will be judged to be higher in internality than will a female who uses the indirect strategy, whereas comparatively high in-

ternality will be attributed to the indirect male (H_3).

Another factor (in addition to initiator sex) which may influence judgments of message strategies is situational context. We are interested in the effects of prior message context, i.e., the previous messages in which the direct or indirect topic management strategies are embedded. More specifically, we are intereseted in the relationship between judgments of the strategies of an initiator and the positive versus negative character of the preceding remarks of the respondent (referred to below as positive versus negative situation). A respondent may be encouraging (for example, by agreeing with the initiator: "I like X, too") or discouraging ("I don't like X"). A negative remark by the respondent seems likely to inhibit the initiator's attempts at social penetration; a positive remark seems likely to facilitate such attempts. Will the use of direct or indirect strategies by the initiator be judged as more or less effective depending upon the positive or negative context established by the respondent's previous remarks? Will the relationship between strategy and context be affected by the sex of the initiator?

A final research question is: Will judgments of the strategies used by male or female initiators in positive or negative situations vary with the sex of our subjects?

Method

Subjects.--Participants in our study were 30 male and 20 female students.

Situations and Strategies.--Our hypothetical male and female initiators were given a single intention or purpose, which was described to our subjects: Connie (or George) would like to become friends with George (or Connie). Some additional information was provided: "They do not know each other very well now but they do have a mathematics class together. Connie (or George) has

never spoken to George (or Connie) before except to say hello." The initiator then decides to talk and begins the conversation.

In the positive situation, the following dialogue was provided to our subjects:

Initiator: Hi there. What have you been up to (name of respondent)?

Respondent: I just finished watching the movie.

Initiator: I really liked the film. I saw it last week.

Respondent: I liked it also, I had to watch it for a class in American Civilization.

The negative situation went like this:

Initiator: Hi there. What have you been up to---?

Respondent: Oh, not much.

Initiator: I see you've just come from the film. I saw it last week. I really liked it.

Respondent: It was alright. ~~I had to watch it for a class in American Civilization.~~

Following the respondent's last remark, the initiator engaged in what we have called topic management. In one case, he or she used a very indicrect strategy, saying: "I was trying to figure out some things the other day. But I'm not sure I'm making any progress." Here the topic is shifted. The initiator is attempting to keep the conversation going, but the utterance relates to the initiator's intention (becoming friends with George) in a highly indirect way. A second strategy was more direct; the initiator said: "One of my favorite parts was the ending of the film. What did you think about that?" In this case, the initiator adheres to the "film" topic, maintaining the focus of conversation, pursuing the goal of becoming frinds with the respondent. A third strategy was also quite direct: "Say, would you like to go

across the street and have a cup of coffee with me?" Here the topic is shifted as in the first strategy, but in this case the utterance represents the initiator's intention very directly. We were interested in the potentially different consequences of the two direct strategies, one a rather tenacious attempt to maintain the established conversational focus, the other a bold expression of intent.

Measures.--Each subject judged the effectiveness of the initiator's strategy on a seven-internal, bi-polar scale: very effective-very ineffective. Judgments of the initiator were also made on seven-interval, bi-polar scales; these assessed perceived competence of the initiator, predictability, and internality. Regarding the last dimension, subjects were asked to agree or disagree with the following statement: (Initiator) is the kind of person who would say "It is hard to know whether or not a person really likes you." This item, originally one of several used by Rotter, loaded most highly on a "friendship internality" factor obtained in a previous study.[24]

Subjects indicated their sex and also completed Bem's "androgeny scale"[25] which is designed to measure self-perceptions of "masculine" or "feminine" tendencies.

Design .--The basic design is a 2 x 2 x 3 x 2 factorial (positive vs. negative situation x male vs. female initiator x topic management strategy 1 vs. 2 vs. 3 x male vs. female subjects). A second design blocked on the basis of subject's scores on the "androgeny scale" instead of their biological sex.

Results

Message Effectiveness.--A four-way analysis of variance (blocking on biological sex) yielded main effects for situation ($F = 13.69$; $df = 1, 48$; $p < .001$) and for message ($F = 43.75$; $df = 2, 96$; $p < .001$). These main effects are qualified by two significant interactions: situation x message ($F = 7.57$; $df = 2, 96$; $p < .001$) and situation x message x sex of initiator ($F = 3.23$; $df = 2,96$; $p < .05$). Not suprisingly, there was a tendency for subjects to judge messages as generally more effective in the positive or encouraging situation ("positive" $\bar{X} = 4.85$; "negative" $\bar{X} = 4.35$). Also, the indirect message was judged clearly less effective than were the two direct messages ("indirect" $\bar{X} = 3.39$; "topic pursuit" $\bar{X} = 5.04$; "intention pursuit" $\bar{X} = 5.37$). Graphing of the interactions revealed that the effect of the "situation" and "initiator" variables was more pronounced for the direct "topic pursuit" strategy than for the direct "intention pursuit" strategy. The "situation" and "initiator" variables had little effect on judgments of the effectiveness of both "intention pursuit" and indirect strategies. The female initiator was judged as quite effective in the positive situation when she used the direct strategy of "topic pursuit." On the other hand, the male initiator was judged as comparatively ineffective when he used this strategy in a negative situation. Generally, the "topic pursuit" strategy was thought to be more effective in the positive situation than in the negative situation, whereas the "intention pursuit" strategy was perceived as working effectively regardless of the constraints imposed by situation and sex of initiator.

Competence.--A four-way analysis of variance yielded main effects for situation ($F = 4.35$; $df = 1, 48$; $p < .05$) and for message ($F = 47.56$; $df =$

2, 96; $p < .001$). These effects parallel the main effects described for "message effectiveness." Higher competence was attributed to the initiator in the positive situation ("positive" $\bar{X} = 4.76$; "negative" $\bar{X} = 4.48$). The initiator was seen as relatively incompetent when he/she used the indirect message strategy ($\bar{X} = 3.56$); the "topic pursuit" and "intention pursuit" strategies yielded higher competence ratings ("topic pursuit" $\bar{X} = 4.89$; "intention pursuit" $\bar{X} = 5.42$). A situation x message interaction was also obtained ($F = 3.50$; df = 2, 96; $p < .05$). Graphing of the means revealed that the effect of the positive vs. negative situation distinction was greater for the "topic pursuit" strategy than for the strategy of "intention pursuit." When the situation was negative, "topic pursuit" yielded relatively negative judgments of competence; when the situation was positive, this strategy yielded relatively positive judgments of competence. In the case of "intention pursuit," judgments of competence were comparatively positive regardless of situation.

Predictability.--The four-way analysis of variance yielded a main effect for situation ($F = 5.08$; df 1, 48, $p < .05$) and for message ($F = 34.01$; df 2, 96; $p < .001$). In the positive situation, the initiator was seen as somewhat more predictable ("positive" $\bar{X} = 4.52$; "negative" $\bar{X} = 4.25$). The initiator was judged to be comparatively predictable when he/she employed the indirect strategy ("indirect" $\bar{X} = 3.33$; "topic pursuit" $\bar{X} = 5.13$; "intention pursuit $\bar{X} = 4.69$). Two interactions were obtained: situation x message ($F = 4.72$; df 2, 96; $p < .05$) and sex of initiator x situation x message ($F = 4.10$; df = 2, 96; $p < .05$). Graphing of the means indicated that "topic pursuit" produced an attribution of greater predictability than did the "intention pursuit" strategy except when the initiator was a male in the negative situation, in which case differences in message strategies

did not affect judgments of predictability. The most predictable initiator was a female using "topic pursuit" in the positive situation; the least predictable initiator was a female using "intention pursuit" in the negative situation.

Friendship Internality.--Two main effects were obtained in this analysis: situation ($F = 9.15$, df 1, 48; $p < .01$) and message ($F = 14.12$; df 2, 96; $p < .001$). The initiator in the negative situation was judged as lower in internal control of friendships ("positive" $\bar{X} = 3.73$; "negative" $\bar{X} = 4.15$--a lower score = higher internality). Also, the indirect strategy produced a judgment of lower internality than did the others ("topic pursuit" $\bar{X} = 3.75$; "indirect" $\bar{X} = 4.51$; "intention pursuit" $\bar{X} = 3.33$).

Androgeny Analyses.--Two classifications were substituted for biological sex of our subjects: persons with masculine self-perceptions (according to Bem's instrument) and persons with "androgynous" (mixed "male" and "female") self-perceptions. Only nine subjects scored as "feminine" or "near feminine" and they were deleted from subsequent analyses. The four previous four-way analyses of variance were re-computed blocking on sexual self-perceptions instead of biological sex. In no case were main effects obtained for "androgynous" vs. "masculine" subjects and in no case did this variable interact with message, situation, or sex of the initiator.

Discussion

The results of our analyses did not support our three hypotheses. Each of the hypotheses specified an interaction between sex of initiator and message strategy, and these interactive effects were not obtained. Our situational distinction (positive vs. negative) appears to have been a

more important influence on judgments of message strategies than was sex of the initiator. Sex of our subjects (at the levels of biological and psychological classification) had no apparent influence on the judgments of message strategies employed by male and female initiators. In light of the effects which were obtained (main effects for message strategy, for example), it appears that at least some aspects of topic management may be relatively independent of gender. We realize, of course, that we were dealing with only a small sample of the population of message strategies and situational variables; the effects of other strategies in other situational contexts may be strongly influenced by gender.

Our results indicate that initiators employing direct topic management strategies are judged more competent and effective than are those using a highly indirect strategy. This generalization must be taken with great caution, however, for we used a single example of indirection; other forms of indirection may be seen as quite effective. For example, our "indirect" initiator shifted the topic from an external object (film) to self ("I was trying to figure out some things . . ."); perhaps a shift from external object to other ("That's a nice tie you're wearing . . .") would be relatively effective.

Our two direct strategies differed to some extent. When the initiator's strategy corresponded to his/her intention very directly, our subjects rendered a judgment of high effectiveness and competence. Our subjects apparently appreciated this "open" approach, regardless of the nature of the situation or sex of initiator. On the other hand, when the initiator attempted to advance the conversation by pursuing the topic (film), judgments were more dependent upon the nature of the respondent's preceding remarks. Topic pursuit in the context of positive remarks from the respondent was

seen as effective and an indicator of competence; in the context of negative remarks, topic pursuit produced attributions of lower competence and ratings of lower effectiveness. It may be the case that negative cues from the respondent were perceived as demanding a topic shift on the part of the initiator. On the other hand, given positive cues the initiator was free to shift the topic or to pursue it. The interesting implication here is that a negative situation imposes more rigid constraints upon the direction of conversation than does a positive situation. This hypothesis should be tested in subsequent research.

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